

# **Insurgency In Iraq And Afghanistan: Change And Continuity**

**Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, Strategic Studies Institute**

**The views expressed in this and other papers associated with the NIC 2020 project are those of individual participants. They are posted for discussion purposes only and do not represent the views of the US Government.**

# **Insurgency In Iraq And Afghanistan: Change And Continuity**

**Steven Metz and Raymond Millen,<sup>1</sup> Strategic Studies Institute**

---

## **Introduction**

Insurgency has existed as long as the powerful have frustrated the weak to the point of violence. It is simply a strategy of desperation in which those with no other options turn to protracted, asymmetric violence, psychological warfare, and political mobilization. In some modes, insurgents seek to attain their objectives directly by wearing down the dominant power. In other forms, particularly the one developed by Mao Zedong and refined by his disciples, asymmetric methods are used to rectify an adverse conventional military balance, with ultimate victory coming through conventional means once parity or something like it is attained. Ultimately, though, the result is the same: the weak avoid defeat and, over time, the power balance changes and they become stronger.

Throughout history insurgency has ebbed and flowed in strategic significance. While always existing somewhere, at times it was strategic "background noise." At other times, it was a central component of the global security system. This strategic significance was determined by contextual factors. The less the chances of direct armed conflict between great powers and the greater the tendency of major powers to sponsor insurgency as a form of surrogate conflict, the greater the strategic significance of insurgency for regional and global power balances and stability. Today, the combination of the massive conventional military preeminence of the United States, nuclear deterrence between great powers, and multiple sources of global discontent arising from globalization, the collapse of traditional political, economic, and social orders, environmental decay, population pressure, and other factors, insurgency is again surging

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dr. Steven Metz and Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Millen are analysts at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. They performed field research in Iraq during April and May of 2003. LTC Millen also served as an adviser to the Afghan National Army from July to November of 2003. The opinions expressed here are solely those of the authors and do not reflect official positions of the U.S. Army War College or Department of Defense.*

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

in strategic significance. In fact, the world has entered another "age of insurgency" analogous to the period from the 1950s to the 1980s. This is likely to continue for at least several decades.

Every insurgency era differs from its predecessors in some significant ways. The key for those who must confront the threat is discerning the salient changes. It is clear that insurgency has metastasized into a networked global phenomenon motivated by a violent form of radical Islam. But what does that mean? Will old counterinsurgency concepts and strategies still apply? These same questions must be asked when dealing with specific national insurgencies as well. Since the previous insurgency era is only a decade or so in the past, the U.S. defense community has a deep reservoir of residual knowledge. This is both a blessing and a curse. It can provide insights into today's insurgencies but it can also prevent strategists and senior leaders from seeing what is new and different.

To understand the insurgencies the United States now faces, whether those in Iraq and Afghanistan or the global one against violent radical Islam, and to develop coherent strategies to counter them, American planners and leaders must ask two questions: *Do these insurgencies exhibit the characteristics that have traditionally led to insurgent success or victory?* and *Do these insurgencies have any characteristics that break with traditional patterns and may allow them to attain success or victory even though they are missing some of the traditional determinants of success?*

### **Conceptual Framework: Determinants of Success and Discontinuities**

During the past century some insurgencies attained victory or success. Many more have failed. Those which did succeed invariably exhibited one characteristic: they were able to prevent the counterinsurgents, whether the regime or outside occupiers, from driving the conflict to the point of decision in the military realm while the counterinsurgents still had an overwhelming military superiority. In other words, the insurgents were either able to make the political and psychological theater of operations decisive (since it was much easier for them to attain parity with the counterinsurgents in this sphere), or to postpone decisive military struggles until they remedied their military

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

disadvantage through guerrilla, political, and psychological operations. At a somewhat finer level of resolution, successful insurgencies had four characteristics in common:

*Effective strategy* Insurgent strategies have two interlinked dimensions: they must avoid a decisive engagement until the adverse power balance is adjusted, and they must take direct steps to adjust the power balance by weakening the counterinsurgents and strengthening the insurgents themselves. Often insurgents have been able to build strategies in which they seize and hold the initiative due to their inherently greater flexibility and absence of ethical or legal constraints.

*Effective ideology* There are many variants of effective insurgent ideologies, but are unifying and mobilizing. In the 20th century, the combination of Marxism and nationalism was particularly powerful. The nationalistic angle made the ideology broad and unifying; the Marxist angle focused anger and resentment on the regime and provided a rationale for why the insurgents could expect ultimate success even when the odds against them appeared long.

*Effective leadership* Leading an insurgency is extremely difficult. Insurgent leaders must convince people to undertake extraordinary danger and hardship for extended periods of time with a very small chance of a positive outcome. Those who succeed tend to be those who can unify diverse groups and organizations and mobilize segments of the polity not previously engaged in politics. Psychologically, effective insurgent leaders tend to be so dedicated to their cause that they will persevere even though the odds are greatly stacked against them. In a similar vein, they tend to believe so strongly in their cause that they become utterly ruthless, and are willing to take whatever steps are necessary to weaken the counterinsurgents. Insurgent leadership, in other words, is not a business for the faint of heart, but for the utterly committed.

*A method of obtaining resources* In the broadest terms, insurgents need five types of resources: 1) manpower; 2) funding; 3) equipment/supplies; 4) sanctuary; and, 5) intelligence. These can be *provided*, *seized*, or *created*. Provided resources can come from outside sponsors, domestic supporters, or from the ineptitude of the counterinsurgents (e.g., the government may provide sanctuary by being unaware of the presence of the insurgents). Funding, equipment, and supplies are the resources most often seized, but in some insurgencies, particularly those in Africa, manpower is seized

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

through violence as insurgents undertake forcible recruitment. Just as in nature an organism seeks to obtain food with the minimum energy expenditure, most insurgencies would prefer to be provided resources, but will seize or create them if none are provided or, in some cases, if provided resources come with too many strings attached.

*Discontinuities.* The basic determinants of success remain the same from the previous insurgent era to the new one. In addition, the core characteristics of insurgency--its complexity, and grinding, dirty, violent nature--persist. From a strategic standpoint, though, there are some key changes or discontinuities with effects that have not yet been fully understood:

- *As during the previous insurgency era, national insurgencies are linked to a wider global conflict, but the global conflict is asymmetric, pitting a hyperpower and a transnational insurgent-terrorist network rather than two superpowers.*
- *Insurgent movements can no longer depend on external sponsors for all or most of their resources and therefore must devote an extensive amount of effort to fundraising or income generation.*
- *Insurgents have developed the capability for strategic power projection (terrorism), strategic intelligence, and for the building of wide ranging regional and global linkages without the need for a matchmaker like the Soviet Union or Cuba.*
- *The content of insurgent ideology has shifted. While there are a few lingering Marxist insurgencies, there is a wider range of ideological types. An ideology based on transnational, radical Islam is clearly on the ascent.*
- *Transparency, itself flowing from information technology, globalization, and the international flow of people, has changed the nature of psychological warfare, making it easier to transmit information and build linkages, but harder to sustain perceptions or themes that do not closely match existing predispositions.*

The remainder of this paper will examine the ongoing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan through the lens of these characteristics of successful insurgencies and emerging discontinuities.

### **Iraq**

The United States did not expect to bear the brunt of the responsibility for stabilizing Iraq after the collapse of the Hussein regime. The expectation was that the existing Iraqi security forces would remain intact and play the major role, and that

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

international peacekeepers would lend vital support. Very quickly though, it became clear that armed opposition to the American-led occupation was emerging, and that neither the security forces of the old regime nor international forces could substitute for U.S. and, to a lesser degree, British forces.

In late May 2003—just a few weeks after Coalition forces took control of Baghdad—the first U.S. soldier was killed at a checkpoint in what would become the vortex of the insurgency, Fallujah. By June the first U.S. helicopter had been shot down, sporadic ambush-style assaults on American troops took place, and the U.S. military launched a series of large scale sweep operations to pacify areas of opposition in what had become known as the "Sunni Triangle" north and west of Baghdad. Implored by tapes recorded by Saddam Hussein, insurgents also began attacking Iraqis who supported the Coalition. On July 5, seven Iraqi police recruits were killed and 40 wounded by an explosion at a training center in Ramadi. As Americans developed more effective force protection procedures, the insurgents focused more and more on such "soft" targets. As Mowaffak Rubaie, a member of the U.S.—appointed Governing Council, noted, "They are targeting the new leadership of Iraq because they can't get to the Americans, because the Americans are very well protected."<sup>2</sup> Judges, city officials, translators, and journalists were also assaulted.<sup>3</sup> In August, the United Nations also became a target as a truck bomb at the U.N. mission killed Sergio Vieira de Mello, its head, and 23 other people. Later that month bombs killed 95, including a key cleric, at a Shi'ite mosque in Najaf.

Throughout the summer and into the autumn, the insurgents in the Sunni Triangle developed increasingly sophisticated methods for attacking U.S. forces, particularly using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). By the autumn attacks increased to 20-35 a day from 10-15 a day during the summer.<sup>4</sup> In October, the parallel campaign of suicide bombing escalated with several in Baghdad inside of a week. In early November, insurgents shot down two American helicopters, killing 22. The insurgents were learning

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "What Did We Do to Deserve This?," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2003, p. A1.

<sup>3</sup> Yochi J. Dreazen, "Insurgents Turn Guns On Iraqis Backing Democracy," *Wall Street Journal*, December 10, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> "Insurgency in Iraq," International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Comments*, Vol. 9, Issue 8, October 2003, p. 1.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

and adapting. Early in the conflict they attacked U.S. forces from close range and were often killed or captured. By the autumn, they relied on standoff weapons such as IEDs and mortars.<sup>5</sup> And, the insurgency spread geographically: by November, the U.S. was confronting a "sustained period of resistance" in the key northern city of Mosul.<sup>6</sup> Attacks on infrastructure like oil pipelines and electrical pipelines thwarted the restarting of the Iraqi economy. Even though the insurgents were responsible, this often worked exactly as they planned since it stoked anger and resentment toward the Coalition.

Following an extensive American offensive in November, the insurgents shifted attacks on U.S. forces to Coalition allies including Spain, Japan, and South Korea.<sup>7</sup> By this time there was a noticeable increase in the coordination and resolve of the insurgents.<sup>8</sup> The capture of Saddam Hussein in December led to a temporary dip in the number of attacks, but by January levels had reached new highs, with the deadly combination of direct attacks on U.S. forces, attacks on Iraqis supporting the Coalition, and attacks on other soft targets such as reconstruction workers, and infrastructure. A parallel but interlinked war developed against Iraqi's Shi'ite community. On March 2, 2004, a series of car bombs near Shi'ite religious ceremonies in Baghdad and Karbala kill at least 270 people.

By March, U.S. fatalities began surging again, ending hopes that the capture of Hussein had taken the life out of the insurgency.<sup>9</sup> In April the insurgency reached a new peak of violence as U.S. forces entered Fallujah to attempt a clearing and stabilization operation while, at nearly the same time, the radical Shi'ite cleric Moktada al-Sadr led an insurrection across southern Iraq. Both represented significant changes. Fallujah reflected a shift from "shoot and scoot" attacks to set-piece small unit actions—what one

---

<sup>5</sup> General John Abizaid, quoted in Brian Bennet, "Who Are the Insurgents?" *Time*, November 24, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Todd Zeranski, "U.S. General Sees 'Sustained' Resistance in Northern Iraqi City," Bloomberg.com, November 19, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Blanford, "Attacks Turning To US Allies in Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 1, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Shadid, "Battle Reveals New Iraqi Tactics," *Washington Post*, December 2, 2003, p. 1; Sabah Jerges, "Guerrillas Now 'Stand and Fight'," *Washington Times*, December 2, 2003, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> John Daniszewski, "U.S. Combat Fatalities In Iraq Surge Suddenly," *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 2004; Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, "G.I. Toll Is Rising As Insurgents Try Wilier Bombs and Tactics," *New York Times*, March 15, 2004, p. 1.

## Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

military officer called "a stand-up fight between two military forces."<sup>10</sup> For the first time, the insurgents attempts to create and hold "liberated areas."<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously, the sophistication, coordination, and aggressiveness of attacks on other American forces and supply routes increased sharply, to include the destruction of key bridges on planned advanced routes.<sup>12</sup> Analysts had long warned that if the insurgency spread from Iraq's Sunni to its majority Shi'ite community, the Coalition would be in an untenable position.<sup>13</sup> Al-Sadr's uprising, while not supported by most Shi'ites or the more respected clergy, raised fears of this happening as the formerly secure southern region of the country became a battleground.<sup>14</sup> Particularly troubling was the apparent coordination, even alliance, between the two.<sup>15</sup>

*Strategy* The strategy of the Iraqi insurgency is difficult to discern. This is not unusual. It often takes insurgencies an extended period of time to become coherent as various factions and leaders vie for control. While American ideas about insurgency tend to be shaped by "mature" ones like Vietnam in the 1960s, it is easy to forget that this period of confusion and incoherence is natural, perhaps even inevitable. While insurgent operations appear to have been planned by the Hussein regime while it was still in power, that regime demonstrated its strategic ineptitude over and over, so it is not surprising that there is no overarching strategy for the insurgency.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the United States kept recognized and responded to the insurgency with a quickness that is without historical

---

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Thom Shanker, "U.S. Prepares a Prolonged Drive to Suppress the Uprisings in Iraq," *New York Times*, April 11, 2004. Also, Ann Scott Tyson, "Insurgents In Iraq Show Signs of Acting As a Network," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 28, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> "The Iraq War's New Phase," Stratfor.com, April 11, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, "Insurgents Display New Sophistication," *Washington Post*, April 14, 2004, p. A1.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq: Too Uncertain To Call*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 14, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "Iraq Insurgency Spreads, U.S. Finds More Foes and Fewer Friends," *New York Times*, April 9, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Vick, "Muslim Rivals Unite In Baghdad Uprising," *Washington Post*, April 7, 2004, p. 1; Jeffrey Gettleman, "Signs That Shiites and Sunnis Are Joining To Fight Americans," *New York Times*, April 9, 2004, p. 1; Annia Ciezadlo, "Nationalism Grows In Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 15, 2004; Annia Ciezadlo, "Shi'ites Ally With Sunnis In Iraq," *Washington Times*, April 20, 2004, p. 12; and, Karl Vick, "Shiites Rally To Sunni 'Brothers'," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> On Pentagon report concern the planning of the insurgency by Hussein's intelligence services, Thom Shanker, "Hussein's Agents Are Behind Attacks in Iraq, Pentagon Finds," *New York Times*, April 29, 2004, p. 1; Douglas Jehl, "Plan For Guerrilla Action May Have Predated War," *New York Times*, November 15, 2003; Scott Ritter, "Defining the Resistance In Iraq—It's Not Foreign and It's Well Prepared," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 10, 2003; Vernon Loeb and Thomas E. Ricks, "Is This Hussein's Counterattack?" *Washington Post*, November 13, 2003, p. A1.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

precedence kept the gestation period short. This further stymied any attempts to formalize the insurgency and develop a more coherent strategy.

The inchoate strategy of the Iraqi insurgency reflects the looseness, even incoherence of the movement. It is also a survival technique. The more the insurgency solidifies and develops coherent organizations, procedures, and strategy, the more vulnerable it is to political and military actions by the Coalition. At this point, the insurgents are too weak to allow that to happen. Even if they would prefer a more coherent organization and strategy, they must recognize that—as in nature--only insurgencies with powerful survival instincts have a chance of success. And, the vagueness of the strategy makes it easier to mobilize strength by building a wide coalition among the various groups opposed to American involvement in Iraq.

The strategy which has emerged, however inchoate, is a fairly standard one for insurgents opposing outside occupiers. It has three parallel and interlinked tracks: 1) show the weakness of the occupier by making the country ungovernable—i.e. follow the old Russian revolutionary slogan "the worse, the better" by taking any action that creates instability, chaos, conflict, and fear; 2) increase support by showing boldness and provoking the counterinsurgents into steps that alienate or anger the population; and, 3) directly erode the will of the counterinsurgents by causing casualties.<sup>17</sup> This is done through a sustained level of action punctuated by periodic offensives or spurts of activity to retain the psychological initiative. In other words, the counterinsurgents must never be able to create the impression that things are definitely getting better.

The ultimate determinant of the outcome in an insurgency is the *perception* of the eventual outcome held by the parties involved—the insurgents, the counterinsurgents, the population, and, to a lesser extent, other actors. If the counterinsurgents are able to create and sustain the impression that no matter how long it takes, they will ultimately persevere, they will. If the insurgents are able to prevent this, they have the potential to win. The way insurgents do this is by launching some sort of military or psychological offensive whenever the counterinsurgents appear to be on a trajectory for success, and by creating the impression that the insurgency is growing in strength. As U.S. Brigadier

---

<sup>17</sup> For a complete list of the components of the insurgent strategy, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq and Asymmetric Warfare: The US vs. FRL/Islamist Duel*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 6, 2003, pp. 8-11.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

General Martin Dempsey complained, "Every time we do something positive, the bad guys try to reverse the psychology with their own negative act."<sup>18</sup>

An important step in creating the impression that the insurgency was on the ascent was the attempt to unify the Shi'ite uprising in the spring of 2004 and the ongoing Sunni based insurgency. This is potentially very problematic for the United States. The components of the insurgency—the foreign terrorists that rely heavily on car bombs, the main insurgency in the Sunni triangle, and the Shi'ite uprising—have radically different methods of operation and thus require different responses. One thing that made Vietnam so difficult for the United States was its multidimensionality. That was not either a classic insurgency or a semi-conventional war, it was both simultaneously. To the extent the conflict in Iraq becomes and remains a complex, multidimensional one, the more difficult counterinsurgency will be.

By the spring of 2004, there were signs that the insurgents were winning the decisive battle for future expectations. The April battle for Fallujah, even though it was ultimately a military defeat, had begun to take on a "mythic" air since it appeared to illustrate that the insurgency was on the ascent.<sup>19</sup> In May public opinion polls began to indicate that a majority of Iraqis said they would feel safer with U.S. troops gone and favored immediate withdrawal.<sup>20</sup> The guarded optimism of a few months earlier had been replaced by a deep sense of pessimism.<sup>21</sup> It was not clear that the Coalition could reverse this trend by persisting with its existing strategy.

Yet what is missing from the strategy of the Iraqi insurgents is a "positive" dimension. Most victorious insurgents have been able to create the impression both that the government or occupier cannot create a stable or just society, and that they can. So far, the Iraqi insurgents have not projected a vision of the type of nation they would create if they expel the Coalition. Again, this is not unusual: this is very young and immature insurgency. If it is sustained, such a positive dimension to the insurgent strategy is likely to emerge.

---

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in James Kitfield, "Ramadan Offensive," *National Journal*, November 1, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Vick and Anthony Shadid, "Fallujah Gains Mythic Air," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Hannah Allam, "Outlook Is Bleak For Success In Iraq," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 9, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Williams, "As Violence Deepens, So Does Pessimism," *Washington Post*, May 18, 2004, p. 1.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

*Ideology* The ideology of the Iraqi insurgency follows the pattern of the strategy—it has remained inchoate, whether to be as inclusive as possible or simply because the Coalition response has prevented the emergence of any clear leadership. The normal pattern in insurgencies (at least successful ones) is to begin with general grievances, refine this into a very inclusive ideology that can build a broad based coalition, and then at some point to undergo further ideological refinement as one faction comes to dominate the others. The primary foundation of the ideology of the Iraqi insurgency is opposition to foreign rule. This is based both on nationalism and religion. They believe, as Daniel Pipes phrases it, that "rule by non-Muslims is a an abomination, a blasphemous inversion of God's dispensation."<sup>22</sup> But the Iraqi insurgents have not yet crafted any kind of overarching ideological framework *other than anti-Americanism* than can incorporate the largely secular Ba'athist from the old regime, the Sunni tribes, the Shia groups, and the outside jihadists. What they have is a proto-ideology. It capitalizes on intense and growing dislike of the United States and taps into wider anger in the Islamic world, but has no positive dimension that promises a better world once the Americans are expelled.

The crucial point will come when the counterinsurgency begins to assume more of an Iraqi face. History suggests that insurgencies that do not develop a coherent and complete counter-ideology may be able to sustain their struggle for an extended time and may even be able to seize power (e.g. Sierra Leone), but they cannot consolidate control. If the Iraqi insurgents cannot develop a coherent and complete ideology they will find it difficult to sustain their movement at a level adequate for any kind of decisive outcome.

*Resources* The potential manpower base for the Iraqi insurgency is immense. Unlike the Viet Cong or many of the African insurgencies that were forced to provide the most rudimentary military training to their recruits, Iraq is awash with men who have had military, police, or intelligence training. And cultural and linguistic factors make it relatively easy to integrate foreign recruits. But the insurgents were able to draw on only a small segment of this pool since they were seen as linked to the unpopular Hussein regime, and a large segment of the Iraqi population at least temporarily tolerated the Coalition.

---

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Pipes, "Why Iraq Rebels," *Jerusalem Post*, April 14, 2004.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

A series of factors began to change this, though, and helped mobilize participants at the different levels always found in insurgencies: leaders or cadres, full time fighters, occasional or part time insurgents, active supporters among the population, and passive supporters. These factors included the Coalition Provisional Authority's "de-Baathification" policy and decision to disband the Iraqi military which left hundreds of thousands of men with no means of support; aggressive, sometimes culturally insensitive techniques on the part of American military forces; slowness restoring the economy; and more effective psychological campaigns by the insurgents than by the Coalition. Most importantly, the Sunni minority, which had held a privileged position under Hussein, saw this dominance slipping.<sup>23</sup> Sunni tribesmen thus become the principal source of support for the insurgency.<sup>24</sup> The Shi'ite uprising, while still limited, could greatly expand the potential recruit base. The Sadr militia, which is based on the very poorest segment of the Shi'ite community, is estimated to have between 300 and 400 hard core fighters, but can mobilize between 3,000 and 6,000 when challenged.<sup>25</sup>

Equipment and supplies have been less of an issue for the Iraq insurgency than for many of its counterparts elsewhere due to the huge caches of arms and munitions scattered about the country, many of which remained unguarded after the collapse of the Hussein regime.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the insurgents probably have enough basic arms and ammunition to last for several years. Funding is more of a problem. It appears that the first few months of the insurgency were fueled by money stashed away during the Hussein regime. In addition, some money is coming in from outside supporters. Whether this is adequate or no is hard to say. Reportedly al-Jazeera broadcast a statement from one group offering a bounty of \$15 million for anyone who kills a top American commander.<sup>27</sup> If this is true, the insurgents must have an extensive war chest.

---

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Shadid, "In New Iraq, Sunnis Fear a Grim Future, *Washington Post*, December 22, 2003, p. 1; and, Daniel Williams, "In Sunni Triangle, Loss of Privilege Breeds Bitterness," *Washington Post*, January 13, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institute, quoted in Tyson, "Insurgents In Iraq Show Signs of Acting As a Network."

<sup>25</sup> Shanker, "U.S. Prepares a Prolonged Drive To Suppress the Uprisings in Iraq."

<sup>26</sup> Lowell Bergman and Eric Schmitt, "Vast, Unsecure Iraqi Arms Depots Could Take Years to Dispose," *New York Times*, September 30, 2003, p. 1; "Deadly Munitions Still Litter Much of Iraq," *Baltimore Sun*, October 26, 2003; Dan Murphy, "Iraq Awash in Military Weapons," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 20, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> "Still a Cauldron, Not a Quagmire," *The Economist*, May 1-7, 2004.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

Given the nature of the Iraqi insurgency with its emphasis on guerrilla attacks and terrorism, and its lack of "liberated zones," it is likely that it is a relatively inexpensive insurgency to operate in comparative terms. Similarly, the Iraqi insurgents have no access to sanctuary other than through dispersal and subterfuge within the country. This is a serious organizational constraint.

The information age has provided the insurgents a wealth of strategic intelligence. Through personal visits, telephone, and email, the global jihadist and terrorist network has provided advice on tactics learned in places as diverse as Afghanistan and Chechnya.<sup>28</sup> The insurgents have access to an unlimited amount of information about the political situation within the United States and other Coalition nations. There has also been concern by the U.S. military that efforts quickly share tactical and operational "lessons learned" could provide intelligence to the insurgents. At the local level, the insurgents probably rely on networks of informers and sources linked by phones and other methods much like 20th century insurgencies. While they may have attempted to or even succeeded in infiltrating the new Iraqi security forces or other Iraqis working for the Coalition, the fact that the Coalition itself controls counterinsurgency planning limits the chances of intelligence leaks.

*Leadership* Because of the vigor of the Coalition counterinsurgency efforts, no clear leadership has emerged among the insurgents. The capture of Saddam Hussein in December removed a symbolic rallying point (albeit one that was probably an impediment to the growth of the insurgency outside the Sunni Triangle). At the local level, the insurgents are led by a diverse group of military and security officials from the former regime and others inspired to rebellion but, as Edward Wong of the *New York Times* puts it, the insurgent has not presented a "public face to the world at large."<sup>29</sup> There is no question that they have many of the characteristics typical of successful insurgencies, specifically the dedication and ruthlessness. The question remains whether a culture where no charismatic leaders other than Saddam Hussein were tolerated can now produce them remains to be seen. Ultimately, the pathologies of Hussein's system of

---

<sup>28</sup> Jim Krane, "Iraqi Insurgents Use Tactics They Learned from Chechens, Taliban, Al-Qaida," *ArmyTimes.com*, January 5, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Wong, "Rebels Without a Cause Or a Web Site," *New York Times*, December 7, 2003.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

rule may prove to be the downfall of the insurgency he unleashed, at least in terms of leadership.

*Assessment* The Iraq insurgency does not yet have the characteristics that were evident in past insurgencies that attained victory, but it is a very young and immature movement. If the Iraq insurgency were compared to the Viet Cong one year after its founding, the prognosis would likely be grim. On the other hand, the Viet Cong were working with a blank canvas of political unmobilized peasantry, so they could create a political consciousness and therefore mold a unified ideology and movement. The problem for the Iraqi insurgents is that they are operating in a politically conscious and highly factionalized environment. This suggests they can never become a truly effective movement and thus can only succeed if their opponent—the American allied new Iraqi government—proves particularly inept.

The only characteristic of the Iraqi insurgency that may allow it to break with previous patterns and attain success if those it is missing key components is the linkage to the global anti-American movement. If, somehow, the insurgency can develop a political front that establishes legitimacy outside of the jihadist movement by becoming part of anti-Americanism rather than part of global terrorism, this could represent part of a true new wave in insurgency—the strategic globalization of the phenomenon with Iraq at the cutting edge.

### **Afghanistan**

The ongoing insurgency is a mixture of that nation's traditional, persistent low level conflict between various groups and powerful figures, and the global insurgency centered on radical Islam. In a sense, Afghanistan represents a continuation of lawlessness, more than open conflict, with various militant groups vying for power. Sometimes acting in concert but often in isolation, these insurgent groups exert a presence that is growing in light of the upcoming national elections in September. At the same time, the jihadists, led by Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda, remain determined to see that Afghanistan is a battlefield in their global struggle with the United States. To the extent there is a coherence to the strategy and the ideology of the Afghan insurgency, it is derived from this linkage to the global insurgency.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

**Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

*Strategy.* The goal of bin Laden and the radical Islamicist is to create Islam's historical caliphate and expunge it of outside influence. Because the United States represents the greatest obstacle to achieving this objective, bin Laden has sought to challenge, humiliate, and psychologically dominate the United States, at least in the eyes of the Islamic world. His belief is that radical Muslims brought down one superpower through asymmetric warfare and can do it again. The decade of attacks culminating with September 11, 2001 was designed to lure the United States into Afghanistan in an attempt to replicate the Soviet-Afghan conflict. Complete success in this provocation led to a temporary setback for al Qaeda resulting in the loss of Afghanistan as a base of operations. Nevertheless, bin Laden likely views Iraq as an excellent opportunity to accomplish what he failed to do in Afghanistan. The funneling of militants and other resources to Iraq seems to support this shift in strategy. Iraq presents an opportunity to seize and hold the initiative and perhaps shift the balance of power not only in the Middle East but also in Afghanistan. The relatively quiet battlefield in Afghanistan will resume once bin Laden feels the time is ripe for a counter offensive. Such an opportunity will arise if one or more warlords take up arms against the central government.

*Ideology.* The natural xenophobia and dislike of outsiders that has characterized Afghanistan for centuries provides a foundation for the insurgency. Bin Laden has incorporated this into this Islamic ideology which appeals to a large following among Muslims. His pious demeanor, self-sacrifice, stoicism, and charity towards others have solidified the devotion of his followers. Except with the Taliban, bin Laden's appeal to Afghans is limited. Intrinsically suspicious and somewhat xenophobic, the Afghans, which made up the Northern Alliance bitterly, contested the al Qaeda and Taliban alliance for years. Bin Laden and al Qaeda have a more devoted following among the Pakistanis, and given Pakistan's past support of the Taliban, Pakistan will remain an ideological bastion for al Qaeda and the Taliban, despite the official stance of the Pakistani government.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

*Resources.* The various insurgent groups, with al Qaeda, the Taliban, and HiG<sup>30</sup> being the most prominent, have varying degrees of available resources. Even though not contesting the authority of the central government outright, Afghan warlords represent a latent threat that can erupt into civil war if threatened. The manner in which President Hamid Karzai manages the warlords will determine whether they are marginalized as a threat or simply insurgents-in-waiting.<sup>31</sup> Still, in Afghanistan, the forms of resources—manpower, funding, equipment/supplies, sanctuary, and intelligence—still favor the Afghan central government and coalition forces.

As an international insurgent organization, al Qaeda potentially has the greatest access to manpower. Having set up a loose system of recruitment in the Middle East, Chechnya, Europe, the United States, and the Philippines to name just a few, al Qaeda potentially can mobilize experienced fighters for the fight in Afghanistan. Getting these soldiers into country is another matter entirely though. With a more vigilant world, al Qaeda operatives must run the gauntlet of airline screening and various country passport controls. Even with fake credentials and bribes, this vehicle may not be worth the effort. It is more likely that an Underground Railroad system is used to bring in recruits. Such a system is slow and intermittent to rely on if al Qaeda decides to launch a concerted offensive. Moreover, al Qaeda must support its global activities at the same time. Even with a robust global recruitment program, al Qaeda will likely suffer from manpower shortages continually. In view of these difficulties, the Taliban likely fills the majority of manpower requirements. With access to followers in southern Afghanistan, the Taliban can tap new recruits as long as the Afghan central government struggles to exert control

---

<sup>30</sup> “Gulbuddin Hikmatyar founded Hizb-I Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) as a faction of the Hizb-I Islami party in 1977, and it was one of the major mujahedin groups in the war against the Soviets. HIG has long-established ties with Bin Ladin. In the early 1990s, Hikmatyar ran several terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and was a pioneer in sending mercenary fighters to other Islamic conflicts. Hikmatyar offered to shelter Bin Ladin after the latter fled Sudan in 1996.” HiG operates in “Eastern Afghanistan (particularly Konar and Nurestan Provinces) and adjacent areas of Pakistan's tribal areas.” Intelligence Research Program, “Hizb-I Islami Gulbuddin (HIG),” Federation of American Scientists, <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/hig.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> The conflict with al Qaeda and the Taliban is not a central issue with the Afghan central government. The primary concern remains the tension between the central government and the warlords regarding the extent of central authority. To date, none of the warlords has contested the central government's legitimacy. Barnett R. Rubin, *In Kabul, The Government Owns the Peace*, International Herald Tribune, May 6, 2004.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

over the southern provinces. The HiG as well as the various warlords have access to recruits from the provincial areas they control. Currently the HiG is in open conflict with the central government and the coalition forces; however the various warlords also represent a latent threat as their militias have an aggregate strength of 100,000.<sup>32</sup> Still, many warlords and their militias currently assist the coalition in locating al Qaeda and Taliban elements.<sup>33</sup>

Al Qaeda is the wealthiest of the lot but also has global commitments it must finance. Osama bin Laden's business sense has generated enormous financial assets for its global insurgency. Given the extensive and diverse financial network, al Qaeda is not likely to be strangled financially.<sup>34</sup> The question that al Qaeda must answer is how much funding it wants to devote to the struggle in Afghanistan. An indicator of offensive intent therefore will be the amount of funding al Qaeda devotes to its effort in Afghanistan. The Taliban, HiG, and warlord militias rely on the lucrative opium trade<sup>35</sup>, taxation and extortion of the local inhabitants, and various legal and illegal market activities. Shutting down these sources of funding is largely dependent on the central government's ability to extend its control over the country. Heretofore, progress in this regard is slow.

As a result of 23 years of near constant warfare, equipment and supplies for the insurgents are abundant. In fact, the nascent Afghan National Army is poorly equipped in comparison to the warlord militias. Al Qaeda and the Taliban in contrast are light infantry since they were driven into the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan as a result of Operation Enduring Freedom. The warlords are not likely to contest the central government in the near term and an alliance of convenience between al Qaeda/Taliban and any warlords is highly unlikely given the inimical past relations. Even cooperation between the HiG and al Qaeda/Taliban is pretty limited despite an open goal of resisting the central government. As such, until al Qaeda/Taliban can capture

---

<sup>32</sup> *New Afghan Army Hit By 3,000 Deserters*, London Daily Telegram, January 12, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> This has become a double-edged sword since coalition cooperation with warlord militias hinders the central government's extension of its authority and perhaps opium crop eradication. Judy Dempsey, *US Planning For Stopgap Afghan National Guard*, London Financial Times, February 12, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, Washington D.C.: Brassey's, INC, 2002, pp. 29-44.

<sup>35</sup> Afghanistan supplies three quarters of the world's illicit opium trade. That 28 out of 32 Afghan provinces have opium fields illustrates the pervasive and lucrative opium market by warlords. F. Andy Messing Jr. and Sarah J. Lippitt, *Perilous Afghan Undercurrents*, Washington Times, April 28, 2004.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

**Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

sufficient equipment and weapons as well as control territory in Afghanistan, it will remain a light infantry force.

Gone are the days in which al Qaeda and the Taliban enjoyed unreserved sanctuary and succor in Pakistan. Other than local hospitability and a modicum of security, both are tolerated but must be vigilant to Pakistani army raids and sweeps. Taliban control of the Afghan southern provinces along the Pakistan border is also tenuous. Certainly, it enjoys the loyalty of local Afghans, but does not control any territory to classify it as a sanctuary. Of course, warlords fully control their provinces with few instances of central government interference. Real central government challenges to their authority have yet to materialize, so even though they are not insurgents, the central government must remain vigilant of their loyalty.

The militants enjoy enough of an intelligence edge to protect them from counter insurgency operations. The combination of human intelligence and media reports are extensive enough to alert even the most obtuse insurgent whenever something is afoot. Historical analogy suggests that insurgents will penetrate the central government, the military, police forces, and local governments. A certain degree of penetration of the coalition headquarters and forces must also be assumed. It would be extremely foolish to assume differently. Coalition and Afghan National Army forces can achieve tactical and sometimes operational surprise, but as al Qaeda, Taliban, and HiG forces are veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War, they can easily use the mountainous terrain to escape even the most well laid trap. Regarding the central government's ability to gather intelligence on the warlords, it is hampered by a nascent intelligence service, limited budgets for agents, technical means, and to a degree, legal restrictions. To date, the central government is likely as ignorant of warlord activities as it is of the active insurgents.

The decades of peaks and troughs regarding the fortunes of the militant forces have made them more resilient to the psychological impact of setbacks. Although the past two years represent a low point, recent activities indicate they are attempting to reverse the course of events. The sources available to the militants are dependent on their current state of affairs.

Because of the limited authority of the central government beyond Kabul and the limited number of coalition forces in Afghanistan, the warlord militia have virtually

**Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

uncontested control of their provinces. Fortunately, the warlords are pretty compliant with the central government and the coalition forces. Furthermore, the militias protect their provinces from Taliban and al Qaeda influence. The HiG does contest part of Konar and Nurestan in eastern Afghanistan and the Taliban exerts a certain degree of control in southern Afghanistan, but these are not secured positions. Frequent patrols, ambushes and raids by U.S. forces in both areas keep such sanctuaries tenuous for the militants.

Warlord militias are well armed and despite the UN Disarm, Demobilize, and Reintegrate initiative, few weapons and militia have been processed.<sup>36</sup> The reality is that the warlords give only token compliance and retain the best weapons and equipment for their forces. Their militias dwarf the Afghan National Army in terms of manpower, 100k to 6k and modern weaponry.<sup>37</sup> Hence there is no need to acquire more weapons or equipment.

Al Qaeda and Taliban however do lack sufficient weapons to mount a large-scale offensive. Fortunately, neither has captured many weapons as a result of raids or ambushes. Except with the occasional brush with the U.S. forces, most Taliban and al Qaeda attacks have been made on police and civilian organizations, netting little or no weapons. Because of the increasing pressure brought to bear on the Taliban and al Qaeda in Pakistan, it is unlikely that they have assured access to weapons as well as the ability to train their forces to any marked degree.

*Leadership.* Perhaps the most important factor for achieving success, leadership serves to organize, motivate, formulate a winning strategy, and instill resolve.

Without a doubt, bin Laden is the most talented leader of all the insurgent leaders. He has used his money, business savvy, cultivated relationships, and charisma to command a global following. Nevertheless, even these qualities failed by large to create

---

<sup>36</sup> The original DDR goal was to process 40 percent of the militia by June 2004. Thus far, only about 5,500 have been disarmed, far below the 33,000 goal. Carlotta Gall, *Already Stretched, Afghan Leaders Face New Threat*, New York Times, April 12, 2004. James Astill, *Disarming Militiamen Vexes U.N. Force*, Washington Times, April 12, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> To date, much of the equipment and weapons turned is old and in disrepair. The militia retains all the modern equipment. Hamida Ghafour, *Afghan Warlords Hand Over Heavy (And Old) Weapons*, Los Angeles Times, January 16, 2004.

As a member of the OMC-A, ANA Plans and Design Team from July through November 2003, LTC Millen had the opportunity to examine some of the weapons handed over to the ANA. The vast majority of weapons were pre 1970s technology and were rusty and in need of repair and extensive parts. The ANA is able to maintain these weapons only through the dedication of volunteer mechanics and the cannibalization of equipment from the vast bone yard outside of Kabul.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

cohesion among the Afghans during the Soviet-Afghan War and the civil war which followed. He was likely and often quite beside himself with frustration. His past attests to his ruthlessness, but he has failed to use this to good effect in Afghanistan, especially against the United States. Other than occasional suicide bomb attacks, ambushes, and assassinations of local government officials, bin Laden's al Qaeda and the Taliban have been remarkably quiet. Nevertheless, bin Laden is unyielding in his determination to continue the struggle until the bitter end. He has likely created a succession of leaders to carry on the struggle after he has gone as well.

Each warlord's leadership position in his province is uncontested. Other than pro forma acknowledgment that the central government is the sole authority in Afghanistan, there is no question they remain in charge of their provinces. Since they fought against the Soviets and then the Taliban for twenty-three years, the warlords are capable of ruthlessness and are determined as well. Sooner or later, the central government will need to challenge the warlords or at least marginalize them. Until then, President Karzai must continually play a balancing act.

*Assessment.* Although the Afghan insurgents exhibit the characteristics that have lead to traditional insurgency success, a number of factors prevent them from achieving final victory. First is their inability to craft an ideology that promises more than return to the post. The Taliban was a government in power before its ouster by the U.S. supported Northern Alliance. Its harsh and tyrannical rule was reviled by most Afghans, who do not wish to see a return of the regime. Afghans view the al Qaeda as "Arabs," meaning they are regarded as outsiders and not particularly admired. Following the decade-long Soviet-Afghan War, the 1990s only resulted in more devastation, slaughter, and oppression. So, the Taliban and al Qaeda have hardly endeared themselves to the Afghans by large. The Taliban/al Qaeda message of "bring us back into power, and we will stop the killing" that characterizes this insurgency is hardly convincing to the Afghans. In short, the Taliban/al Qaeda alliance will not by itself conquer the coalition and central government. It will no doubt attempt to exploit and create a power base in Afghanistan if one or more warlords wage open conflict with the central government.

## **Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

### **Conclusions**

At the tactical level, there is only minimal difference between this insurgency era and the previous one. For counterinsurgents, that is good news. While the U.S. military has allowed its ability at counterinsurgency to atrophy, it can easily rebuild it. The basic soldier skills and professionalism that exist throughout the military provide a solid foundation. Developing counterinsurgency capabilities in the other components of the U.S. government, which is as vital to success as augmenting the military's ability, will be more difficult, but not impossible. In general, the Department of Defense is aware of what need to be done at the tactical level and is making improvements. The real challenges are at the strategic level, in understanding where insurgency fits into American strategy and how the strategy of insurgency has evolved. Ultimately, insurgency is a strategy, not a tactic.

The most basic rule of strategy is that the resources expended and risks borne in pursuit of an objective should be in proportion to the expected benefit of attaining that objective or of defeating a threat. In the most basic sense, insurgents succeed either by a *direct* strategy in which they erode the strength of the government until they can confront it on equal terms, or an *indirect* strategy in which they skew the cost/benefit ratio for the counterinsurgents, making persistence not worth the cost. The direct strategy works best when insurgents are fighting a relatively weak and isolated local regime; the indirect is most effective against a local regime with outside patrons, or a powerful outside occupier.

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the insurgents have not been able to develop the features and capabilities that have characterized insurgencies able to attain decisive victory in the past. But, at the same time, they have been able to coalesce to the point that their supporters have a reasonable expectation of long term success and thus their survival is likely. The greatest probably, then, is that both insurgencies will neither attain decisive victory (so long as the United States remains engaged in supporting its local ally) nor will they be defeated, at least for many years.

One of the greatest vulnerabilities of contemporary insurgencies is their need to generate their own funds. Both the Iraq and Afghan insurgencies appear to be cheap enough to operate and to have enough of a funding stream that this does not create a

**Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

decisive vulnerability. Two other wild cards could alter the course of this protracted, bloody stalemate, particularly in the case of Iraq (which is the more complex and mature insurgency). One would be the development of a political front and some degree of international legitimacy on the part of the insurgents. Given the growing anti-Americanism around the world, this is not inconceivable. Second would be the use of "power projection" by the insurgents, specifically a terrorism campaign against American targets designed specifically to undercut support for involvement in Iraq. It is hard to predict whether this would increase or decrease public support in the United States, so it would clearly be a high-risk venture by the insurgents.

Ironically, even though the world has entered a new era of strategic significance for insurgency, no model or strategy of insurgency that is as effective as Maoist People's War has emerged. Neither Iraq nor Afghanistan is likely to produce one. The jury is still out on the global insurgency against radical Islam. Ultimately, then, today's insurgency is basically an attempt to add a few new twists to old methods. This is hard to kill, but it is unlikely to generate a new wave of insurgent victories.